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by Charles T. Tart

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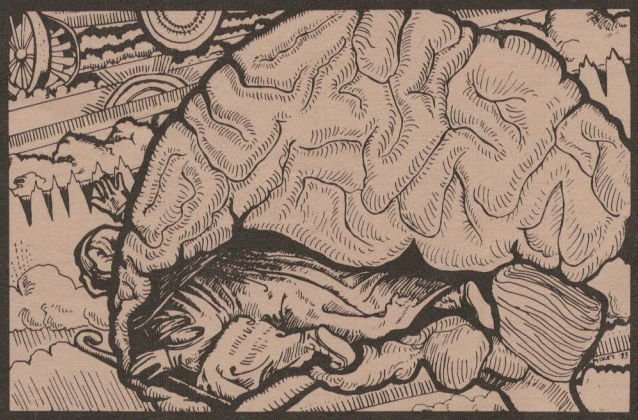


ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SEARCH FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

In October of 1984 I attended a unique conference on modern psychology and Buddhism, centered around a series of talks by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As my contribution, I tried to clarify for Westerners what is meant by the idea of "enlightenment," and to sketch how altered states of consciousness are essential to full enlightenment. This article and a subsequent one in a future issue are based on my remarks at the conference.

While I have studied a little Buddhism over the years, I am not very knowledgeable about it, so my remarks about altered states and enlightenment will primarily arise from my Western scientific and personal knowledge of altered states. It is clear to me, though, that Buddhist knowledge is of enormous value in trying to understand these unusual states of mind, and I hope that the East-West dialogues begun at this conference and at other places will lead to great advances in Buddhist knowledge, in Western scientific knowledge, and in human knowledge per se, regardless of whether we label it "Buddhist" or "Western."

In this article I will deal with two main ideas. What do we mean by enlightenment? What are altered states of consciousness? In a subsequent article we will consider some ways in which various altered states can be used for growth toward enlightenment.

States of Consciousness

Let us start by sharpening our use of the term "state of consciousness." For precise scientific use, I proposed, in my "States of Consciousness" book (Tart, 1975) that we reserve the term "state" for major alterations in the way the mind functions.

For example, if I asked, "Are you experiencing a night time dream right now, just dreaming that you are here listening to me, but soon you'll wake up at home in bed?", I would not expect you to say yes. Actually, I've occasionally had someone raise his hand when I've asked this in lectures, but such people want to play word games or be philosophical, even though I've said I'm using these words with their ordinary meaning. If I ask such a person whether he is willing to bet me fifty dollars that he will wake up in bed from this dream in five minutes, there are no takers!

We make common-sense distinctions about states. There is a pattern to our mental functioning that we can examine, and after examining, classify. If we examine the pattern of our mental functioning at this moment, it doesn't feel like the pattern we usually call "dreaming," it feels like the pattern we call "waking" or "ordinary consciousness." The difference is clear, and, for the vast majority of us, dreaming is discretely different from waking.

To be more precise, in my systems approach to understanding altered states, I defined a "discrete state of consciousness" (d-SoC) for a given individual (individual differences are important here) as "...a unique configuration or system of psychological structures or subsystems." The "parts" or aspects of the mind we can distinguish for analytical purposes are arranged in a certain kind of pattern or system. "The structures vary in the way they process information ... within varying environments." There is always some variation in the exact way our mind functions at any moment, even though the pattern remains recognizably the same.

"The structures operative within a discrete state of consciousness make up a system where the operation of the parts, the psychological structures, ... stabilize each other's functioning by feedback control, so that the system, the d-SoC, maintains its overall pattern of functioning in spite of changes in the environment." (Tart, 1975, p. 58). I can suddenly clap my hands, you are startled, there was a change in the environment and your momentary internal mental functioning, but you don't suddenly go into some state of "trance," attain enlightenment, pass out, etc.: your state of consciousness maintains its integrity in a changing world.

A state is an altered state if it is significantly and discretely different from some baseline we want to compare things to. Since we usually take ordinary waking consciousness as our standard of comparison, a state like nocturnal dreaming is an altered state. Other well known examples of altered states are the hypnotic state, states induced by psychoactive drugs such as alcohol, states centered around strong emotions, such as rage, panic, depression, and elation, and states which can be induced by meditative practices.

My Interest in Altered States

I would like to be able to discuss enlightenment and altered stares from an exclusively scientific perspective, citing evidence from dozens of experiments, and drawing on knowledge tested through the critical review of hundreds of colleagues.

Unfortunately, if I restricted myself to this kind of scientific knowledge, I would have almost nothing to say! Western scientific knowledge about altered states is uneven. For some states, such as hypnosis, we have made a good beginning at detailed scientific knowledge. For others, such as those that can arise from meditative practices, we know hardly anything at all. I have been studying altered states long enough to believe I understand some things about them that have not yet been scientifically investigated, and I will draw on this personal knowledge in these discussions. This is my best effort, but it is not "textbook" type knowledge where you will get uniform agreement among Western scientists.

My personal interest in altered states began when I was a child. For as far back as I can remember, my dream life was real and vivid. My parents, being "normal," taught me that dreams were not "real," and that I needn't pay attention to them, but my direct experience contradicted the usual Western point of view. How could people dismiss such real aspects of life? Why did I forget my dreams so readily? How could I improve the quality of my dream life? One question that especially intrigued me: I could fly in dreams by a certain act of will: why couldn't I make that same act work in waking life so I could fly here!

The Power of Altered States: Hypnosis

My childhood interest in dreams was one factor in my choosing to become a psychologist, and many of my early research projects involved dreaming. The altered state that most impressed me early in my research career, though, was hypnosis, and it can serve to briefly illustrate the enormous power to change "reality" that altered states have.

In inducing hypnosis I would sit down with a volunteer who wanted to be hypnotized. We were both "normal" people. With our eyes we saw the same room around us that others saw, with our ears we heard the ordinary and "real" sounds in the room, smelled what smells were there, and felt the solidity of the real objects in the room. Then I began to talk to the subject. We gave the style of talking the special name of a "hypnotic induction procedure," but basically it was just talking. The subject had not been given any powerful drugs, was not in a special environment, had nothing external done to his brain, and yet..... In twenty minutes, with a talented subject, I could change the universe he lived in.

With a few words, the subject could not lift his arm. With a few more he heard voices talking, when no one was there. A few more words and he could open his eyes and see something that no one else could see, or, with the right suggestion, an object in plain sight in the room could be made invisible to him.

Another suggestion and the subject would have a dream, sometimes as vivid or more vivid than his nighttime dreams. Another suggestion and the subject would forget the present and be five years old, feeling and acting as he did when he was five. Another suggestion and he would not remember what happened while he was hypnotized after he woke up.

A sense as basic as pain could be abolished. In spite of the number of times I have seen it, a test procedure we called "anosmia to ammonia" still amazes me. I would tell a subject that he could no longer smell anything. Then I would hold a bottle of household ammonia an

inch under his nose and ask him to take a good sniff. You all know that the smell of ammonia is not only a strong smell, it is an extremely painful sensation, as if your nostrils were set on fire! A talented hypnotic subject would take a deep sniff, while I winced. No reaction. No tears would form in his eyes, he wouldn't jerk his heads away, or show any signs of anything. Did you smell anything?" "No."

For those inclined to refresh their memories of the smell of ammonia, I would advise starting with a very small sniff!

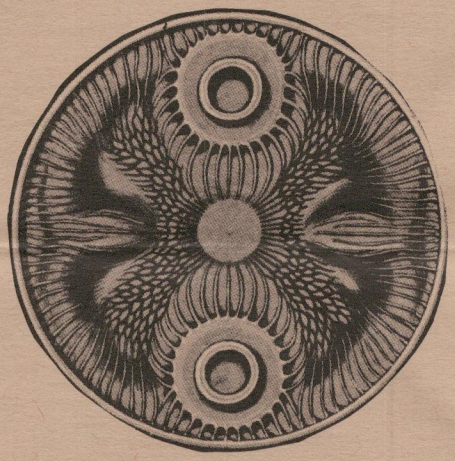
So-called ordinary reality can disappear as a result of a few minutes of talking. Readers who recall the article on consensus trance in the November 1984 issue of The Open Mind will further realize that the "trancelike" quality of ordinary consciousness, consensus consciousness, is even stronger than hypnosis. Can we really take the "common sense" wisdom of ordinary consciousness for granted, then?

What is Enlightenment?

A part of my mind is highly amused when I plan to write about the nature of enlightenment. What presumption! Isn't enlightenment something possessed only by superhuman beings, and understood only by them? What in the world can a Western psychologist have to say about it?

As I will touch on later, a part of enlightenment certainly involves the knowledge that many of the most important aspects of enlightenment are non-verbal in nature. Words cannot capture the essence of this knowledge. Further, enlightenment involves knowledge that cannot be adequately comprehended in our ordinary state of consciousness. Here we are, though, using words in our ordinary state of consciousness. Nevertheless, words in our ordinary state can be useful in thinking about enlightenment, especially if we are careful not to confuse the words with the realities. We will go on and consider some aspects of what enlightenment is, so we can later see how altered states fit in with it.

To begin, I find it helpful to think about enlightenment as a continuum, rather than an all-or-none state. Seeing it as a totally-incomprehensible-to-us absolute end point, with no intermediate steps, does make it difficult to talk about, and difficult to do anything about. Compared to the rest of us, a pilot is enlightened about flying airplanes, but he didn't get that way in a single, magical act, he studied for a long time, moving along a continuum from being completely unenlightened about flying to knowing more and more about it. When we think about enlightenment on a continuum, we can see it as a process, not just a final state, and as a process that we can take part in.



Basic Givens

There are certain things I will take as givens for the purposes of this article, even though each could be explored at length in some other context.

First, awareness is. Our basic ability to have experiences, to know that we are, to be aware of things has never been satisfactorily explained in terms of anything else. Current Western science likes to assume that awareness will be explained as an aspect of brain functioning, reduced to "nothing but" some action of the brain, but this is an item of current faith and fashion, not good science. I do not believe we will ever be able to "explain" awareness in terms of something else. But we can be aware: that is an axiom.

Consciousness, as opposed to basic awareness, is that enormously elaborated, educated, habituated, and conditioned system which we normally experience as mind, For our second given, A primary function of consciousness is the **simulation** of the environment, the creation of an internal representation of the outside world and of oneself, such that we have a good quality "map" of the world and our place in it. This distinction between consciousness and awareness is further elaborated in my "States" book (Tart, 1975).

Most of you have seen pictures of flight simulators. These are devices for training pilots. You can train a pilot by having him read some instructions and then putting him at

the controls of a real airplane. It's a fine system, but costly. If he make a mistake, the plane crashes. No more pilot-trainee, no more plane. Instead you can have him enter a special room which, from the inside, looks just like the cockpit of the plane he is training for. When he operates the controls to start the simulator's "engines," he hears the sound, feels the vibration, and sees the appropriate meters reading out RPM, temperature, oil pressure, etc. He sees a runway and airport ahead of him when he looks out the simulator's "cockpit window," the scenery moves when he "taxis" the plane, etc. It's just like piloting a real plane as far as sensory feedback goes, with one important difference: when a fatal mistake is made that crashes the plane, you get "CRASH!" displayed on the "cockpit window" instead of a dead trainee and a destroyed airplane, and the trainee can go on to practice again.

Modern science has created a useful model of reality in which we "live inside" a simulator. "Consciousness" is seen as being inside the brain. Consciousness per se has no direct access to the world around us (ignoring the reality of extrasensory perception, as conventional scientists do), but only to processes inside the brain. These brain processes take the information that our senses provide us about the world and create a simulation of that world, just as the machinery of the flight simulator creates a simulation of being in an airplane. This brain simulation is our major tool for coping with ordinary reality, and so it is important that the simulation be accurate. The degree to which the simulation is accurate is an aspect of enlightenment. The degree to which the simulation is a poor representation of external reality and the degree to which we mistakenly identify the simulation, experienced reality, with actual reality, are important aspects of lack of enlightenment.

Third, we have a basic nature. To be "human" is to have characteristics, potentials, limits. It is important, however, not to confuse what our ultimate nature is or might be with what we currently think it is, or with what our culture has told us it is.

Fourth, we have an acquired nature. Whatever our basic nature is, it has been subjected to an enormous amount of shaping, bending, conditioning, indoctrination, development, repression, etc., in the course of our personal enculturation, as we have discussed in previous issues. Our perception, our thinking, our feelings, our assumptions and intuitions, and our behaviors have all been strongly molded. This has given us many useful skills and many insane sources of useless suffering. It is a great mistake to confuse our acquired nature, the product of our cultural and personal histories, with our basic nature. Most people do make this confusion and thus cut themselves off from many of our basic human possibilities.

To keep the acquired, semi-arbitrary, conditioned nature of our ordinary consciousness before us in the rest of the discussion, I shall not use the phrase "ordinary consciousness," with its connotations of "normality" anymore. I shall substitute a technical term consensus consciousness, (Tart, 1975) to remind us how much our everyday consciousness has been shaped by the consensus of belief in our particular culture.

The Tool Analogy

We can now consider the question of what enlightenment is by means of an analogy.

A carpenter is a person who has to solve a variety of problems in the physical world by using tools to build things. A good carpenter has many tools available (including the necessary ones) and knows how to use them. He has hammers, saws, rulers, squares, nails, pencils, etc. He uses the saws to cut, not to hammer, the hammer to drive nails, not to chop through boards, etc. A poor carpenter would be one who doesn't have the necessary tools to do the job, or who can't improvise adequately from the tools he does have. A poor carpenter would also be one who has the necessary tools, but doesn't know how to use them properly, or, for whatever reason, won't use them properly.

These two dimensions of adequacy in carpentry, having the right tools and knowing how to use them properly, are analogous to two dimensions of enlightenment. The tools are like the skills, including access to various altered states, that you have. The ability to use each tool intelligently and properly, according to its inherent characteristics and the needs of the job, is analogous to the degree of enlightenment you show within a particular state of consciousness.

Thus there are two independent dimensions of enlightenment for any person. What states are available to you, with their particular characteristics, talents and costs? We will call that the "available states dimension" of enlightenment. Within any of these states, how intelligently do you understand and use the characteristics of that state? We will call

that kind of intelligence the "within states" dimension of enlightenment.

A person may be relatively enlightened on one of these dimensions and not on another. Like a carpenter with only a few tools, a person might be "stuck" in consensus consciousness, e.g., with no access to altered states, yet be very mature, intelligent, enlightened in the way he uses the mental qualities he has. He is relatively enlightened within that one state, but deficient in access to other states. Another person might be like a sloppy carpenter, having access to many tools but using them poorly. I have certainly known people who could enter many exotic altered states, but whose unintelligent and neurotic behavior showed they certainly weren't very enlightened. Let us look more closely at the qualities we would expect of within-state enlightenment.

Qualities of Within-State Enlightenment

Basic awareness is the ultimate essence of any state of consciousness, so within-state enlightenment would include the ability to focus one's awareness as desired, within the limits of the natural capacity of that state. Such limits should be found by effort, not by pre-established beliefs which might artificially limit the capacity. Thus any aspect of the state could be focused on, brought to awareness. Since initial awareness is usually the prerequisite for using a capacity, this sets the stage for use.

An ability to focus awareness as **needed** by your survival and growth needs is also vital. You might desire, for instance, to focus on a pleasing aspect of a situation you are in, say the taste of a good meal you are eating. But if there is a potentially dangerous aspect of the situation, you had better perceive it, even if it is unpleasant and you would rather be aware of pleasant things. The lurking figure outside the window may frighten you and spoil your meal, but you are more able to do something constructive in this situation if you know about the figure than if you keep it out of your conscious awareness. Giving priority to more basic needs over less important desires is a quality of within-state enlightenment. Undistorted perception/simulation of the world, within the inherent limits of the state, is another important quality of within-state enlightenment. In any state, for example, the nature of the human eye sets some ultimate limits on what can be visually perceived, but the constructed nature of visual perception after the initial stimulation of the eye can vary greatly in its accuracy. Perceiving people as threatening when they are friendly, for example, can lead to treating them in a hostile manner and evoking a consequent hostile reaction, all of which is unenlightened and leads to useless suffering.

I am not sure that there is any one state of consciousness that offers totally unlimited and undistorted perception of the world around us. Every state that I know of seems to offer perceptual advantages in some respects, and disadvantages in other ways. Thus recognition of the state of consciousness you are currently in, knowledge of its advantages and disadvantages, leading to optimal use of the state, is another important quality of within-state enlightenment. This leads to another quality of enlightenment which applies to the available--states dimension as well as the within-states dimension of enlightenment, viz. recognition that the state of consciousness you are currently in may not be very useful for handling the life-situation or problem you are currently facing.

Qualities of Enlightenment That Involve the Available-States Dimension

The recognition that you are in a state that may not be useful, or at least not optimal, for dealing with a current situation is important. You might be called on, for example, to help settle an argument between lovers, but be in a

state of rage from an earlier, unrelated encounter with someone else. A state of rage might be highly useful for saving your life in certain kinds of situations where you are attacked, but its characteristics do not include the calm sensitivity about hurt feelings between lovers that are required to help them remember their basic love after their argument!

If you recognize your current state and understand it enough to know it is not a good one for dealing with your current situation, you could try to postpone action until you happen to be in a more appropriate state. This is a second quality of available-states enlightenment. An active form of this quality would be knowing what state is optimal for the situation you are currently in **and** knowing how to end your current, inappropriate state and induce the optimal one.

A third quality of enlightenment on the available-states dimension is that you not only have a clear understanding of your basic nature as it manifests in the state you are currently in, but you have at least a some recognition that this is only a partial view that needs to be supplemented by the knowledge available to you in other states. Thus knowledge and action in any particular state must be tempered by the memory of knowledge gained in other states of consciousness.

For example, I may be in a state of rage, and as I get the advantage of my opponent it is perfectly "natural" and "reasonable," given my state, to want to destroy him utterly and to enjoy destroying him! That is the inherent "logic" of a state of rage. There may be relatively unenlightened inhibition of my urge to destroy: it may be checked by the emotional conditioning of my superego, or by my fear of the consequences of my action. More enlightened control may occur if, in my state of rage, I recall other states in which I recognize my kinship with my opponent and have compassion for him. Then I may terminate my state of rage and enter a more appropriate state, assuming that compassion is a higher value for me than winning every fight. If I cannot voluntarily end the state of rage at will, I can at least keep myself from acting wholeheartedly on the basis of my current rage.

To more fully illustrate this dimension of available-state enlightenment, suppose you are in some state where you are full of compassion, but you are dealing with someone who is enraged. The enraged state may be available to you: you could use the other's rage as an induction technique to enrage yourself, if you thought that would be the optimal state to deal with your opponent. Or you can draw on your personal memory of what it is like to be enraged to more fully understand the enraged person you are dealing with, and then act compassionately in a more effective way because of this available-states enlightenment.

This ability to recognize what state you are in and draw on relevant knowledge from other states, as well as having the ability to enter those other states if you desire, implies some aspect of consciousness, of our basic awareness, that transcends any particular state we are in at the time. The nature of that quality is of profound interest, and I suspect some of the higher types of Buddhist meditation practices deal with it.

A fourth quality of the available-states dimension of enlightenment is that access to multiple states of consciousness allows sharper discrimination between our basic and our acquired natures. The bulk of the conditioning and shaping of our acquired nature, our enculturation, took place in consensus consciousness or in some emotional state that is ordinarily accessed from consensus consciousness. Sometimes simply being in some altered state gives an "outside" perspective on the conditioned, restrictive quality of consensus consciousness or of some emotional states, due to the nature of the "logics" inherent in the altered state. This kind of insight may be sufficient in and of itself to dissolve the conditioning in the other state, or may at least form a basis for focused work on the problems in the other states.

A fifth quality of the available-states dimension of enlightenment involves a realistic assessment of your capacities, including the fact that some may only be potentials requiring development at present. A quality experienced in a particular state may need considerable work to become robust and usable in that state, or for you to learn to transfer that quality into some other state, such as consensus consciousness. An experience of great compassion experienced in a meditative state, for example, may carry over into consensus consciousness, making you feel like an enlightened being, until someone insults you and the feeling of compassion is immediately replaced by anger! This kind of discrimination between developed reality and potential is particularly important when there is excessive attachment to an altered states experience, such that you want to believe that you have made it permanent.

Enlightenment and Suffering

Much of our suffering is useless suffering: it is unknowingly created by us through unenlightened, unintelligent use of our human capacities. We misperceive the world or our own self, act in a way that is contrary to the realities of our situation, and then reap the unpleasant consequences. Within-state enlightenment leads to more realistic perception of the world and ourselves, and the consequently more effective action that results can eliminate much useless suffering.

Although not as well recognized in Western science, much of our suffering occurs in various altered states, particularly emotional states, as well as in consensus consciousness. Emotions are such powerful conditioners! By understanding the nature of altered states we can relieve suffering in those states: the remedy to suffering in some particular state is often specific to that state, and our attempts to apply a remedy suitable to some other state lead to frustration and more suffering. For example, fear may trigger an altered state and consequent maladaptive behavior in a person. He spends many hours with a psychotherapist trying to get at the root of this fear. Unfortunately, the hours with the therapist are in consensus consciousness, but the heart of the fear is in experiences only fully accessible in the altered state, so the therapy proves only partially effective.

Enlightenment and Intelligence

I have used enlightenment somewhat synonymously with the idea of intelligence in this discussion, but a kind of intelligence that is emotional and intuitive as well as intellectual, and an intelligence that has the "logics" of several states of consciousness available, rather than only the logic of consensus consciousness. We have not looked at all aspects of enlightenment, of course, but hopefully these ideas will stimulate some reflection of the dimensions of your relative enlightenment. Where do you stand? Where do you need work?

In the next part of this article we will look at some specific ways various altered states could contribute to enlightenment.

Suggestion for Further Reading

Tart, C., States of Consciousness. El Cerrito, CA: Psychological Processes, 1975.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Psychic Thread: Paranormal and Transpersonal Aspects of Psychotherapy, by Elizabeth Mintz, in consultation with Gertrude Schmeidler. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1983, 232 pp., index. An experienced psychotherapist's encounters with and understandings of psi in the course of psychotherapy. A useful introduction to parapsychology in general, with emphasis on its psychological aspects.

Riding the Ox Home: A History of Meditation from Shamanism to Science, by Willard Johnson. London: Rider, 1982, 262 pp., index. Examines the earliest literature on meditation, such as Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms, and relates it to modern ideas, giving a good sense of the continuity of the meditative tradition.

Mind Wars, by Ron McRae. New York: St. Martins Press, 1984, 155 pp., index. What are the military possibilities of psi abilities? The overall picture McRae paints is generally accurate: there has been some military interest in psi phenomena, and there is likely to be more. When it gets down to specifics, though, McRae is not very accurate. Two out of the three references to my work in this book, for example, were factually incorrect, which makes you wonder about other material, particularly those that are supposedly "secret" and so can't readily be checked on. Although I haven't had a chance to do more than skim it yet, I would expect more accuracy from **Psychic Warfare: Threat or Illusion?,** by Martin Ebon. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983, 282 pp., index. Ebon writes in a popular style but has a good reputation for accuracy.

Self-Hypnosis: A Complete Manual for Health and Self-Change, by Brian Alman, with Peter Lambrau. Box 17535, San Diego: International Health Publications, 1983, 279 pp., index. A clearly written, extensive guide to self-hypnosis for the beginner. Useful for learning relaxation, stress control, etc.

A Sociable God: Toward a New Understanding of Religion, by Ken Wilber. Boulder, Colorado: Shambala New Science Library, 1983, 160 pp., index. A major step forward in understanding conventional religion. Wilber evaluates not only the usual social dimensions of religions as behavior control and ethical systems, but also their authenticity as carriers of transcendent insight.

LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS

by Charles T. Tart

Feb. 2, 1985: "Psychological Reflections on the Fourth Way." One day Berkeley workshop, information from the Melia Foundation, 1525 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94709, $30 tuition.

Feb. 15, 1985: Lecture on current developments in parapsychology, American River College, Sacramento, California.

March 23-24, 1985: "Introduction to Parapsychology" course, 2 full days. Information from University of Humanistic Studies, 2445 San Diego Ave., San Diego, CA 92110.

May 2, 1985: Lecture on current developments in parapsychology, Society of the Sigma Xi, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona.

June 14-16, 1985: "Introduction to the Fourth Way." Weekend, information from Joy Lake Community, Box 1328, Reno, NV 89504.

Aug. 9-11, 1985: "Introduction to the Fourth Way." Weekend, information from Esalen Institute, Big Sur, CA 93920, $230 tuition and board.

Aug. 17-18, 1985: "Introduction to the Fourth Way." Weekend, information from Omega Institute, RD2, Box 377, Rhinebeck, NY 12572.

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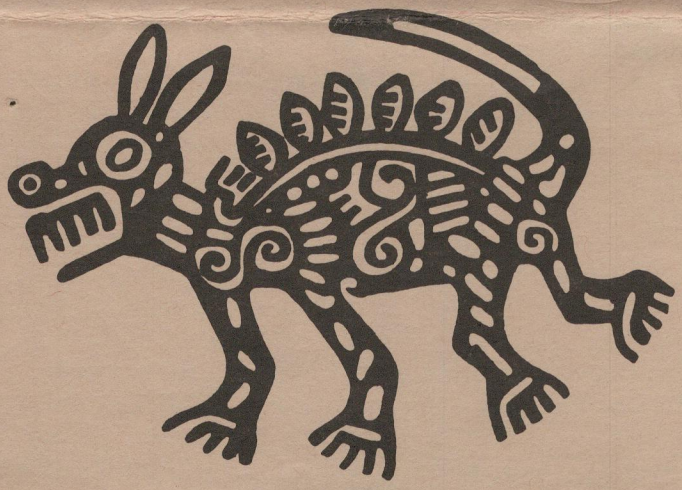

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